

# **‘You are stupid, you are cupid’: playful polyphony as a resource for affectionate expression in the talk of a young London couple**

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## **Abstract:**

Whereas language and gender studies’ explorations of couples’ talk have tended to focus on collaborative vs competitive conversational style, social psychological work on couples’ intimate relationships has long been driven by an interest in expressions of affection. This paper aims to show that linguistic discourse analysis can make a significant contribution to our understanding of how affection is expressed in intimate relationships. The paper focuses on the playful switching of frames, voices, codes and personas which emerges as central to the affectionate practice in the spontaneous talk of a young multi-cultural London couple. It argues that quantitative interview studies based on an a-priori understanding of affection are unable to capture many of the idiosyncratic and creative ways in which speakers express their affection for one another in their intimate talk.

## **1) Introduction**

This paper aims to make a contribution to research on the talk of heterosexual couples in intimate relationships, an area which has not received much attention in language and gender studies in the last 2-3 decades. The self-recorded talk of the young couple I will explore in this paper has redirected my focus from conversational dominance and difference, topics which were at the centre of previous language and gender research on couples’ talk, towards an exploration of expressions of affection. At the same time as offering a fresh perspective to the long tradition of language and gender studies of couples’ talk, this paper will demonstrate the contribution that a discourse analytic approach based on frame analysis (Goffman 1974, Tannen 1993) is able to make to the study of affection in intimate relationships, an area of research that has been dominated by scholarship in social psychology. The paper will focus on the playful switching of voices and personas that emerges as a central resource for the expression of affection in the spontaneous talk of a young multi-cultural couple, arguing that research exploring affection on the basis of predetermined behaviours or locutions (such as ‘I love you’) does not encourage exploration of more idiosyncratic and indirect ways in which intimate partners express their affection for one another.

The pioneering work of Pamela Fishman (1980), Victoria DeFrancisco (1991) and Deborah Tannen (1990) investigated the interaction of women and men in intimate relationships. The argument that women and men’s conversational style differs and can be the cause of miscommunication in couples’ talk was of course most prominently promoted in Deborah Tannen (1990) book *You just don’t understand*. The book had a vast non-academic readership but was vigorously critiqued by language and gender scholars for its reliance on anecdotal

evidence and trivialisation of power differences in couples' interaction (e.g. Troemel-Ploetz 1991). Troemel-Ploetz is particularly critical of what she perceives as Tannen's trivialisation of conversational dominance (ibid. 499). Other pioneering studies of couples' talk, such as Fishman's and DeFrancisco's, conclude from their analysis of their data that men dominate interaction in couples' interaction, e.g. with the help of interruptions and silences, whereas women do the 'conversational shitwork' (Fishman 1980), e.g. by providing conversational support. Peter Kollock, Philip Blumstein, and Pepper Schwarz's (1985) investigation of 300 heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples sought to establish whether conversational dominance in couples is in fact caused by gender or the speaker's power in the relationship. Their data suggest that interruptions, back channel support and tag questions are linked to power rather than 'sex', but findings were complex, as for example in power-balanced female couples there was more back channelling than in power-balanced all male couples, with little difference in cross-sex couples (ibid. 40). On the other hand Mary Talbot's (1992) investigation of the talk of two married couples presents data which appears to confirm that there is a gender difference in conversational style and, in particular, use and perception of simultaneous talk, as one of the husbands interprets his wife's conversational support as disruptive.

Much of the subsequent language and gender scholarship challenged the perceived dichotomy of collaboration vs. competition. An early example was Penny Eckert's (1993) paper on adolescent girls' 'cooperative competition'; and another example is Amy Sheldon's (1997) work on the 'double voice discourse' of pre-school girls who manage to signal cooperation and power at the same time. Deborah Cameron's (1997) famous paper about the gossip of a group of young male college students, and Marjorie Goodwin's (2006) work on the 'hidden lives of girls' belong to a tradition of language and gender work that approached the critique of the collaborative vs. competitive dichotomy on the basis of data from (mostly) same sex interaction.

The aim of my paper is not to provide a further example of the deconstruction of dominance vs. collaboration in couples' talk. Instead I would like to approach couples' talk from a different perspective, focusing on expressions of affection. After listening to several hours of spontaneous conversation recorded by a young heterosexual London couple I realised that my focus needed to be on the love and affection which the two speakers expressed for one another in diverse and creative ways throughout their interactions. There is little linguistic work that explores affection in intimate couples' face-to face interaction (although see below for a discussion of Joanna Channell's 1997 paper on romantic couple's talk on the telephone). Instead my search turned to social psychological scholarship on couples in intimate relationships which often appeared to have been triggered by an interest in (gendered expressions of) love and affection. I will give a brief summary of this work, and a discussion of discourse analytic scholarship on intimacy and affection, followed by an overview of my methodological approach and data, before turning to the analysis of the young couple's talk.

The main part of this paper will explore a range of conversational extracts from my data to demonstrate the playful switching of voices which is central to this couple's affectionate practice. I shall argue that linguistic discourse analysis with an interactional sociolinguistic interest in frames, voices, codes, contextualisation cues and a turn-by turn negotiation of positioning has much to offer to a discussion of affection in intimate couples, particularly because previous research from other disciplines relies on an altogether different type of data (gathered from interviews, questionnaires and diaries) as well as on an a-priori understanding of how affection is expressed in intimate relationships.

## 2) Affection in intimate relationships: a perspective from social psychology

In social psychology, affection in intimate relationships frequently appears theorized from what language and gender scholars would describe as a ‘difference model’, which highlights women and men’s different ways of expressing love (Buss 2006; Harrison and Shortall 2011) or talking about love (Barbara 2008). This view tends to be supported either by sociostructural or by evolutionary theories, for different reasons. The former focuses on gendered behaviour in relation to differences in power and status between women and men, whereas for the latter gender differences result from biological sex differences, reflecting in particular human mating behaviour (Schoenfield et al. 2012: 1397). Despite their differences these theoretical perspectives share the view that

[...] men and women have different *styles* of expressing love in intimate relationships. Specifically, whereas a woman may show her love by sharing her feelings or giving hugs and kisses, a man may show love by washing the dishes, initiating sex, or spending free time with his partner. (Schoenfield et al. 2012: 1397)

However, as Elizabeth Schoenfield, Carrie Bredow and Ted Huston highlight, there is a dearth of empirical work on expressions of affection in intimate couples in the social sciences. Schoenfield et al.’s (2012) paper aims to redress this lack of empirical investigation, presenting their findings from a longitudinal study of 168 couples in rural central Pennsylvania (13 years; 4 waves of data collection). They describe their aim as wanting to find out if ‘love is associated with different behaviours for husbands and wives’ (ibid. 1396). In order to achieve this aim they examine the connections between love and various verbal and non-verbal behaviours displayed by one partner towards the other. The behaviours that are studied in relation to love can be grouped in three overarching categories or variables: socioemotional behaviour, leisure activities and household tasks.

Although I do not share Schoenfield et al.’s interest in exploring if women and men express their affection differently, their study of expressions of affection provides an interesting impetus for my own work. ‘Affectionate expression’ is seen as one of three categories belonging to the umbrella category of ‘socioemotional behaviour’, together with ‘sexual interest’ and ‘negativity’. The study relies mostly on daily telephone diary interviews and other types of more extensive interviews with each of the partners. Participants are asked which behaviours their partner has enacted during the previous 24 hours, in order to correlate this information with the couples’ reports of love (and/or marital satisfaction as they explain in an earlier paper on this study, see Huston and Vangelisti 1991). That is, participants were asked about the following 7 behaviours which were taken to constitute expressions of affection:

- 1) Spouse A approved of or complimented spouse B
- 2) Spouse A made Spouse B laugh
- 3) Spouse A said “I love you”
- 4) Spouse A did something nice for spouse B
- 5) Talked about day’s events
- 6) Shared physical affection (outside intercourse)
- 7) Shared emotions, feelings, or problems

(adapted from Huston and Vangelisti 1991: 725)

In line with many long-standing accounts from philosophy and psychology, including attachment theory, affection is contrasted with sexual interest or sexual passion. Instead '[l]ove was conceptualized as the extent to which participants felt a sense of closeness, belonging, and attachment to their partners' (Schoenfield et al. 2012: 1400). In this paper I align myself with this definition of love/affection. However, the methodological differences between this type of social psychological study and a linguistic discourse analysis of affection expressed in couples' talk are evident.

Social psychological research on expressions of affection in intimate relationships will remain significant, not only for language and gender scholars wishing to investigate couple's talk from a fresh perspective, but also because it allows for the discussion of a wide range of verbal and non-verbal expressions of affection. However, quantitative research of this kind (which tests specific hypotheses), relies on clear a priori decisions about affectionate behaviours, decisions which, for example, resulted in Schoenfield et al. selecting 7 specific behaviours to index 'affectional expression' in couples' intimate relationships. What a linguistic discourse analytic study can offer instead is an exploration of which affectionate practices emerge as significant to specific couples in their daily interaction, and how they emerge in the interaction. This, I believe, has the potential to uncover certain expressions of affection that would have been overlooked in a study that focuses only on a previously determined list of behaviours.

### **3) Intimacy and affect(ion): discourse analytic contributions**

One area of overlap between the social psychological work discussed above and discourse and conversation analytic explorations of relationships and/or affect is a focus on the 'expression' rather than the 'underlying internal experience' of affection (see Floyd 2006: 4). This shared focus differs from the 'psychobiological' (Wetherell 2012) or 'bioevolutionary' (Floyd 2006) paradigm where emotions are seen as situated in the 'interior life of the individual actor' (Goodwin, Cekaite, Goodwin 2012: 16). This paradigm has its roots in Darwin's *Theory of Emotion Expression* (1872/1965) and was developed in, for example, Paul Ekman's experimental research (e.g. Ekman and Friesen 1971) in which 'expression' of affection and/or emotion is investigated in relation to individual bodily responses, including heart rate and facial expressions (for a summary see, for example, Floyd 2006; Goodwin, Cekaite and Goodwin 2012; Wetherell 2012).

However, whereas social psychology and communication scholars (such as Floyd 2006) focus on (verbal or non-verbal) 'behaviour' when examining the expression of affection in intimate relationships, my own discourse analytic approach orients to Margaret Wetherell's (2012) term 'affective practice'. The term 'practice' as opposed to 'behaviour' has long been preferable to discourse analysts (see for example work on 'Communities of practice' by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, 1992); it highlights the interrelation of social and discourse practice, as well as the habitual nature of the discursive activities of speakers. Wetherell (ibid. e.g. 83) writes about 'affect' rather than 'affection' and indeed appears to focus more on emotions such as 'humiliation, exclusion, contempt and shame'. Nevertheless, her work is significant as a background to my own, as her discursive approach moves the focus towards ongoing, co-constructed and normative interaction (ibid. 77-101). The importance of considering 'emotion as situated interactive practice' is also central to Marjorie Goodwin's ethnographic work with young women and families in their home which examines a range of verbal and non-verbal resources, including body posture, employed in multi-party interaction

(e.g. Goodwin and Goodwin 2012: 40; see also Goodwin 2014). Commenting on a particular example from Marjorie Goodwin's work on young women's interaction, Wetherell argues:

If we look back at how the interaction is unfolding, and the layers added by the detail of the words, movements, turn-taking, intonation patterns and so on, we see something a bit more complicated and interesting [....]. We see, in other words, an affective practice unfolding rather than an emotion moving to 'land' on one individual. This is joint, coordinated, relational activity. (Wetherell 2012: 83)

The unfolding, relational and situated nature of affectionate expression or, in acknowledgement of Wetherell's terminology, 'affectionate practice' (I shall use both terms interchangeably) can be seen extremely well in the talk of the young couple which I investigate in this paper. However, neither Wetherell nor the conversation analytic work which has informed Wetherell's approach explore affection in couples' intimate relationships. Instead Conversation Analysis (CA) has focused on the more general concept of 'affiliation', in work which shows how speakers create intimacy, for example by colluding in talking and laughing about their own or other people's improprieties, such as a father's talk with his son about his cancer stricken wife's request for cigarettes (Beach and Glenn 2011), or two friends talking about their sex life (Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff 1978). CA's preference for this concept of 'affiliation' can be explained by its aim to focus on how speakers make their relationships procedurally relevant as they speak (Mandelbaum 2003: 209). As Mandelbaum argues

Like identity, although theorized to be omnirelevant, it can be hard to document the relevance of relationship to the way talk is done. For this reason, conversation analysts often have been reluctant to address issues of relationship, using instead such terms as *alignment*, and *affiliation*. (Mandelbaum 2003: 209)

In this paper it is precisely intimate relationships, and, even more precisely, the expression of affection in couples' talk, which I am interested in. As I showed in the previous section this is a topic which is now very much the realm of social psychological studies. Although I will be guided by Wetherell's focus on the situated, unfolding and relational nature of couple intimacy, I will show that linguistic discourse analysis has much to offer to our understanding of affectionate expression. One of the few such linguistic discourse analytic studies, from a clear non-CA perspective, is Joanna Channell's (1997) study of the famous telephone conversation between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles. This study, which offers a rare example of intimate couples' talk, however, still focuses on what Floyd (2006) would call 'direct verbal speech acts' such as 'I love you', pet names such as 'darling', and compliments such as 'You're a clever old thing' (as well as very overt expressions of sexual desire). Instead, my own study will focus on the much more indirect, playful ways in which two young people express their affection for one another.

#### **4) Data**

The data I present in this paper come from several audio-recordings totalling 3 hours 45 minutes gathered between December 2012 and August 2013, with the majority of talk having been recorded in July and August 2013. The speakers are Amy, who was 19 years old when the recording started, and Ray, who was 18. Amy is of Anglo/Cockney descent, having grown up as an only child with her mother in the East End of London, not far away from Ray. Ray, on the other hand, has 6 siblings and is second generation British Bangladeshi. Amy and Ray have known each other for a long time, as they used to play with each other when they were

children in their neighbourhood, and this is how Amy first got to know Ray's family, including his parents. When they were older teenagers they fell in love, and more recently got married in an intimate Muslim ceremony. Amy had converted to Islam and begun to wear the hijab before she got together with Ray. This had severe repercussions for her from her own family, with her mother not being prepared to allow Amy to live with her any longer. Amy then moved to her own flat, and was supported by Student Finance to complete her degree, although getting by was far from easy. Ray, on the other hand, had not yet told his family about having married Amy at the time of the recordings; he continued to live with his family but came to stay with Amy 2-3 times a week. Amy indicated that she had good understanding of Sylheti, explaining that she had 'picked it up' whilst spending time with Ray's family before they were a couple. As she now does not frequent his family any longer Amy feels that her knowledge of Sylheti has deteriorated somewhat, but she still expressed satisfaction about her overall competence in Sylheti.

All of the talk was audio-recorded by Amy in her flat with the full knowledge of Ray, in the absence of the researcher. I had explained to Amy and Ray that I was interested in what young couples talk about and how they talk to their partners. The couple were also told that they would be able to stop the recordings (or delete parts of it) if they wished and of course it was up to them which part of their private interaction they were going to record. I was in contact with Amy from the beginning of the research process until well beyond the end (see Piller 2002: 40 on women being much more likely to volunteer to take part in research on couples' interaction). In fact Amy contributed to my research in other significant ways by, for example, agreeing to carry out much of the transcription of the talk after completion of the recording. This continuing rapport also meant that I was able to provide feedback on the progress of my research, on the foci which were emerging from my qualitative analysis of the data, including my interest in their different ways of expressing affection. As part of this process I was also able to ask Amy's opinion about my analysis of the data she collected for me and to collect further background information, for example, about Amy's knowledge and the couple's use of Sylheti in their interaction.

### **5) Voice play as a resource for affectionate expression**

In my own naturally occurring data of 3.5 hours of talk between two young spouses there was only one brief exchange of 'I love you'. However, Amy and Ray do express their affection for one another constantly and in many different ways, for example, through the use of ritual insults, switches into baby voice, Sylheti and a range of traditional gender positions. This paper will explore how the two speakers exploit this use of different voices and frames as part of their (frequently playful) affectionate practice/expression.

The couple's affectionate practice is marked by polyphony (that is, multiple voices) and heteroglossia (that is, multiple varieties of speech). Bakhtin's (1981: 324) work on heteroglossia as a 'special type of double-voiced discourse' has inspired some sociolinguistic work on everyday language: Janet Maybin (2006) examined how children quote, appropriate and parody voices of, for example, their teachers in the classroom; Judith Baxter (2014) focuses on women leaders' use of double voicing as a strategy to gain approval in the work place. My own work on the affectionate talk of a young couple will focus in particular on playful switches of voices.

The polyphonic, heteroglossic and playful character of Ray and Amy's affectionate practice will be examined from an interactional sociolinguistic framework, with particular focus on frame analysis. As Erving Goffman (1974: 7, 40ff) notes, the concept of 'frame' was first used by Gregory Bateson in the 1950s. In *A Theory of Play and Phantasy*, Bateson (1987: 185) recalls his observations in a zoo of 'two young monkeys playing, i.e., engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat'. To Bateson, it is clear that for the monkey participants (as well as for the human observers) it was essential to identify the ongoing activity as play rather than as combat, that is, to identify what Bateson (ibid. 88) calls a 'conceptual frame' to offer a context of interpretation for individual actions (such as a punch). Erving Goffman (1974, 1981) builds on and refines Bateson's notion of frame by introducing the concept of footing in relation to what he calls participation frameworks (of production and reception), and, in his 1981 book *Forms of Talk*, applies the concept to everyday spoken interaction. Goffman highlights the relationship between frames and footings when he argues that 'a change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events' (Goffman, 1981: 128).

John Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistic work on 'contextualisation cues' guides our focus on the wide range of linguistic forms which can indicate a change of frame, including markers of prosody (explored by Gumperz in particular in his work on interethnic communication), but also other paralinguistic information; code switches; lexical or phonological choices; and turn-taking strategies (ibid. 131, 162). Deborah Tannen's considerable contribution to frame analysis in linguistics often examines changes in register as one significant means to contextualise shifting frames. For example, in her work with Cynthia Wallat, Tannen (1993) examines the frequent frameshifts in a paediatric consultation by focusing on the range of different registers the paediatrician employs when switching from talking to the child, to talking to the mother or to addressing the potential trainee doctor audience of the video recording of this consultation. In another, more recent chapter, Tannen considers a very particular kind of frame shift which occurs when a 'speaker animates another's voice' in an instance of constructed dialogue which Tannen calls 'ventriloquizing' (Tannen 2004: 402). In this paper Tannen is interested in how 'one family member mediates interaction with a second family member by speaking as, to, or about a pet dog who is present' (ibid. 400). Tannen explicitly positions her own as an extension of Gumperz's work on contextualisation cues, that is, on the linguistic resources speakers use to frame utterances and position themselves and others in interaction (ibid.) The contextualisation cues which Tannen identifies in relation to these particular frame shifts include, amongst others, 'baby talk register' (ibid. 401). Tannen shows how speaking through dogs becomes an interactive resource which allows humans to achieve a range of goals, such as introducing humour, mitigating criticism.

A similar usage of pet names is Wendy Langford's (1997: 170-171) analysis of couples' 'adoption of alter personalities' through the use of fluffy pet/household toys names, including 'flopsy bunny vs. fierce bad rabbit', or 'honeymonster and bearlet', or 'wee pig and big pig' in Valentine's Day messages in the UK broadsheet *The Guardian*. Although not theorised as frame switches or analysed with an interest in contextualisation cues, the chapter offers some insight into couples' affectionate play with voices. As Langford reminds us, one of the most famous literary examples of couples' use of pet alter personas is presented in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, where Jimmy and Alison's everyday struggles prevent them from showing affection for one another unless they inhabit their alter egos as bears and squirrels.

In the talk of the young couple which I examine in this paper, switches into different voices can also serve multiple functions, even simultaneously. However, my particular focus will be

on how these switches constitute a resource for the couple's affectionate practice. Drawing on frame analysis as introduced above I will use the concept of a 'love talk frame' to be able to focus on those moments in which Amy and Ray express their affection for one another, highlighting relevant contextualisation cues which index changes of frames, including switches into Sylheti, marked paralinguistic switches of voice. By being able to follow the speakers' interaction from one turn to another (rather than having to rely on their summary of behaviours in interviews) I will also be able to demonstrate how the playful switching of voices is negotiated by the speakers, and how it allows them to position themselves towards one another and in relation to specific gender discourses.

## 5.1) Playful insults

Verbal competition and (playful) insults have often been associated with men's talk or masculine ways of signalling solidarity (Labov 1972; Kuiper 1998; Evaldson 2005; Schwegler 2007). However, in recent decades there has been some evidence to suggest that playful insults and verbal competition are not restricted to the realm of young (Black) men. For example, Marjorie Goodwin (1990) and Donna Eder (1990) found evidence of ritual insulting in young American working class girls, a result that has been reproduced on the basis of British data by Ingrid Kristine Hasund and Anna-Brita Stenström (1997). Pia Pichler's (2006, 2009) work with Bangladeshi girls in London and Inken Keim's (2007) ethnographic work with the Turkish Powergirls in Germany provide further evidence of girls' verbal toughness.

I am not aware of research on the use of playful insults in couple's talk, although Carolyn Strahle's (1993) analysis of the talk of three friends in their late 20s comments on the teasing going on between a man and a woman who are in the early stages of a relationship. Strahle (1993: 227) suggests that 'their contentious banter displays and nurtures - rather than threatens - their closeness'. The same is certainly true for my own data, where the couple exploit switches into playful verbal competition as a resource to express their affection. What is interesting to note is that the ritual insulting exploited by the couple for the expression of affection again exploits a range of different voices and personas as Extract 1 illustrates.

### Extract 1: 'you are stupid – you are cupid'<sup>1</sup>

(1)

Ray     you know me     you know last time I was in the Olympics  
Amy                                (.) yeah                                {sniffles} yeah{sarcastic }

(2)

Ray                                they called me **the bullet (-) the killer**  
Amy     (.) you <sup>1</sup>gust face                                you're a <sup>2</sup>must face{gentle}

<sup>1</sup>Sylheti: chicken

<sup>2</sup>Sylheti: fish

(3)

Ray     do you know why     (.) because (.) >I used to g- be the god I used to shoot the gun  
Amy                                =why

(4)

Ray     I used to almost shot< some of the people                                four-



Amy (1) yeah (-) yeah I believe you{sarcastic}

(5)

Ray but f- four of them were women so: you know (.) there is good and bad

Amy yeah

(6)

Ray %shut up% {babyvoice}you are stupid

Amy (1) I don't get it (-) you are just dumb{gentle}

(7)

Ray you are cupid{babyvoice} you know what

Amy you are stupid{babyvoice} (-) you are you are (.) you are:

(8)

Ray you know what you know what I wanna do

Amy

This extract gives a first flavour of the importance of the creative use of voices and frames for this couple. In stave 1 Ray positions himself as an Olympic athlete, but subsequently he adopts a number of different personas, which are not always clearly defined and appear to blend into one another. Ray's playful boasting about his fictitious participation in the Olympics communicates the message 'this is play' (Bateson 1987: 179) to Amy. At this moment there are no paralinguistic cues which signal Ray's switch to a play frame but Amy's reaction (including her dry tone of voice) and her take-up of the play frame shows that she has no difficulties in contextualising this utterance as playful. Her immediate reaction contains the first playful insult of the segment, 'you gust face' (chicken face), interestingly presented in a mixed code (see Section 4.2 below for switches into Sylheti). Her second playful insult, 'you must face' (fish face) is then mitigated by her switch to a very gentle voice. Ray continues with his act, casting himself not only as athlete but also as god, user of weapons and murderer. Despite the one second pause in stave 4, Amy accepts the rules of the game (see Labov 1972; Eder 1990; Goodwin 1990) by not challenging the act overtly until stave 6 where she signals her lack of understanding of Ray's rambling.

After Amy briefly steps out of the playful insulting frame, the couple return to it in staves 6-8. However, the talk now shifts from Ray's fictitious boasting into something different, although the competitive playfulness remains. In their subsequent exchange Ray and Amy mostly observe one of the characteristic rules of ritual insulting, that is, they recycle each other's prior moves without producing a denial or a justification. Instead they counter the previous accusation by 'turn[ing it] on its head' and, if possible, rendering it even more insulting (Goodwin 1990: 158-163; 185-186). That is, they move from 'shut up' (uttered by Ray) to 'you are just dumb' (by Amy), followed by 'you are stupid' (Ray) and then 'you are stupid' (Amy) and finally 'you are cupid' (Ray) in staves 6-7.

However, the ritual insulting does not only function as verbal competition here, it is clearly multifunctional. From stave 6 there are clear paralinguistic cues which contextualise this competitive exchange as both playful and affectionate. The use of 'babyvoice' is common in the data (see Section 4.2). Here it marks two overlapping frames, one, the couple's love talk; the other their playful verbal competition. Framed in this way the playful insults actually are expressions of affection, less explicit but not less significant than saying 'I love you' or complimenting somebody on their beauty or cuteness. The fact that Ray's rhyming

development of his playful insults moves from ‘stupid’ to ‘cupid’ offers a further cue to the close interplay between playful insult and expression of affection in the talk of this couple. The polyphony and competitive playfulness that characterises this couple’s talk thus becomes a resource for them to express their affection for one another. The significance of this resource emerges only in the interaction of the couple and could therefore be easily overlooked in research on couples’ intimacy which relies on a predetermined list of behaviours.

## 5.2) Code-switching

In her work on bilingual couples’ talk, Ingrid Piller (2002: 222) argues that the ‘bilingual conversational style’ which her English/German speaking couples both discuss and demonstrate in mutual interviews serves as ‘a conversational resource to perform cross-cultural couplehood’. The same is true for Amy and Ray’s switching into Sylheti (and at times Arabic) which constitutes an important component of the couple’s own style or code. Moreover, their self-recorded spontaneous talk also captures some specific instances and functions of code-switching. Amy, for example switches into Sylheti at times to get Ray’s attention (e.g. at a moment when he is almost falling asleep). Both Ray and Amy code-switch to use certain religious formulae, such as the Arabic greeting ‘As-Salaam-Alaikum’ (‘Peace be upon you’). My focus in this paper, however, is on code-switching as a resource to express affection. This function of code-switching in Amy and Ray’s talk is prevalent, frequently going hand in hand with a switch into what Amy calls her ‘babyvoice’.

### Extract 2: ‘myar dilow’ (give me a kiss)

(1)

Ray {kisses Amy lots of times}  
Amy I know I was like how is this

(2)

Ray {continues kissing Amy} <sup>2</sup>myar dise::: <sup>4</sup>balafy:::  
Amy <sup>1</sup>Myar dilow <sup>3</sup>balafy

<sup>1</sup>Sylheti: “give me a kiss”

<sup>2</sup>Sylheti: “I’m giving you a kiss”

<sup>3</sup>Sylheti: “I like it”

Underlined utterance = ‘baby voice’

(3)

Ray [you’re] so cute you know that {kisses Amy}  
Amy [mm] mm I say (.) mm hh \*tumi shun/dor  
\*Sylheti: “you’re pretty”

(4)

Ray mm (.) \*ammi (.) beshi shundor {laughter}  
Amy {laughter} cutie  
\*Sylheti: “I am very pretty”

(5)

Ray you’re bare cute (.) you know that (2) my::: lonely::: sun shine:::{singing}  
Amy .hhh hhh

In this extract the love talk frame is initiated by one of Ray's frequent non-verbal displays of affection; a lengthy kissing sequence.<sup>2</sup> These frequent instances of kissing constitute an important non-verbal strategy for Ray and Amy to express affection. Amy reacts to Ray's kissing by switching into Sylheti and adopting a baby voice in stave 2. That is, Amy uses both the code-switch and the paralinguistic cues to mark her acceptance of the love talk frame which Ray has initiated. The sequence continues with Ray mirroring both the switch into baby voice and the switch into Sylheti. Here we have an example of conversational collaboration of the kind that Jennifer Coates (1996) described in the talk of monolingual women friends. Ingrid Piller's (2002) work on bilingual English-German couples and Eva Eppler's (2009) study of the talk of female Austrian Jewish holocaust refugees in North London develop the notion of conversational collaboration for bilingual interaction. Piller's interviews capture the awareness of spouses with different first languages that their (collaborative) bilingual language use is a 'constitutive element of their relationship' (ibid. 224). The spontaneous talk of Ray and Amy supports the views of Piller's interviewees, and shows that switching into different languages (and voices) can be a central resource of a multilingual couple's affectionate practice.

The extract shows how the collaborative repetitions and the mirroring of code and voice in staves 2-4 work to reinforce the affectionate content of the exchange, including the couple's comments about kissing and their mutual complimenting. Amy's switch into Sylheti here and in many other instances constitutes an important tool to express her affection, signalling alignment with Ray by demonstrating her interest and competence in his 'first' language (see also Piller 2002). Ray's reaction in stave 3, 'you're so cute', followed by yet another kiss, clearly shows that he too perceives the exchange as affectionate.

There are many instances throughout the recordings where the young couple's play with different languages (and language varieties) is clearly framed as love talk through the use of paralinguistic features. The baby voice adopted in this exchange constitutes an important contextualisation cue for the affectionate framing of this instance of code-switching. The fact that Amy clearly associates this voice with 'love talk' is supported by referring to it as 'baby voice' herself in her transcriptions and post-recording interactions with me. Significantly, Amy also asked me to 'make sure no men hear the parts where I talk in a really cute voice' after I had told her about my intention to present the data at an academic conference. The reason for this concern is Amy's own interpretation of what constitutes proper/decent Islamic behaviour for a wife, which, in Amy's view, does not include the use of her 'baby voice'.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the extract captures another instance of Amy and Ray's creative use of voices. The talk is clearly framed as a display of affection from the start, both by non-verbal cues such as the kissing, the verbal content of what is said, and by the paralinguistic marking of the 'baby voice'. The frequent overlap of love talk and play frames which characterises this couple's affectionate practice is also evident in staves 3-4 where Amy proceeds to compliment Ray on being pretty, and Ray responds to the compliment. Ray playfully subverts what is supposed to constitute an appropriate way of responding to a compliment in a love talk frame, by gloating instead of returning the compliment, a reaction which both acknowledge with laughter (see stave 4) although this does not signal the end of the love talk frame.

### 5.3 Gender positioning

I have so far focused on the use of code-switching, baby-voice and playful insults as some of the central ways in which Amy and Ray express their affection for one another. One final practice which I would like to mention is the couple's playful switching into specific gendered positions in the love talk frame. As the following example shows, this (stereotypical) gendered positioning goes hand in hand with some of the practices that I have just discussed.

The following extract is taken from a conversation about the high cost of a particular grocery item despite it being only 'tiny' or 'kuti muti'. The term 'kuti muti' is then used by Ray with a very different referent. The recording indicates that Amy is ill with a cold.

### Extract 3: 'kuti muti'

(1)

Ray kuti muti like you yeah  
 Amy so it was only \*kuti muti yeah no::::: I'm  
*\*Sylheti: "tiny"*  
underlined utterances = 'baby voice'

(2)

Ray <sup>1</sup>no you're a kuti little muti  
 Amy a big girl mm {<sup>2</sup>screams} well I'm so small  
<sup>1</sup>you are a small little cutie  
*{<sup>2</sup>sounds as if Amy was being poked or tickled by Ray}*

(3)

Ray {laughter}  
 Amy that you look like \*muta betta next to me (1) coz I make  
*\*Sylheti: "a fat boy"*

(4)

Ray big tower = I need to find some (.) meals  
 Amy you look like big tower mhmm =

[...]

(9)

Ray {kisses Amy} (1) I thought so (3) you're very cute when you're ill (.)  
 Amy

(10)

Ray = you're even cute when you're [not ill]  
 Amy I know::: = [you have] to look

(11)

Ray [you]'re more cute now you're ill  
 Amy after me:::[::] I know::: (2)

This extract contains baby talk, switches into Sylheti, and even a playful insult. The conversational strategies which contextualise the exchange in a love talk frame also frame their

discursive gender positioning. In this extract Ray and Amy collaborate in her positioning as ‘tiny’ or ‘kuti muti’ (staves 1-2), a Sylheti expression which is usually used to refer to children, as Ray explained when I raised this after listening to the exchange. Amy’s protestations of being ‘a big girl’ in stave 2 in fact reinforce her positioning as a little girl (who is protesting that she is all grown up). Amy heightens the sense of her tininess by exaggerating the difference in size between herself and Ray in staves 2-4; referring to herself as ‘so small’ and to Ray first as ‘muta betta’ (a fat boy) in stave 3 and then as ‘big tower’ in stave 4. Most of the exchange, once again, is marked by what Amy describes as their ‘baby voice’.

In this extract the alleged smallness of Amy (who is actually a very tall young woman) and the alleged tallness of Ray also index gendered discourses which are informed by an overarching ‘gender differences discourse’ (Sunderland 2004) and which construct the couple in rather stereotypical ways (e.g. as “small girl” vs. “big strong man/protector”). Shortly after this exchange there is more talk about Amy’s cuteness and then Amy explicitly asks Ray to take care of her. Although this is in the context of her illness, Amy’s desire for being taken care of appears throughout the recording in many other contexts.

Many of the gender identities that Ray and Amy index in their talk are traditional, particularly (but not only) in their love talk. Thus, in addition to the position of the little girl/woman who needs to be protected or taken care of, Amy frequently positions herself as the good wife, for example, expressing regret over having eaten Ray’s favourite food by mistake rather than having kept it for him. She is also the “good girl”, who used to play on her own rather than getting involved in mischief with hordes of other kids as did Ray as a child. Another position that Amy takes on frequently (although mostly situated outside a love talk frame) is that of the stern mother who is telling Ray off for not behaving properly. Even Amy’s self-positioning as devout Muslim, keeping Ray from watching either the news or Simpsons by reminding him that it is time for prayers, could be seen to have gendered connotations. Her efforts to prevent men other than her own husband from hearing her loved-up baby voice encapsulate her devout femininity very clearly. Ray, on the other hand, is positioned as protector when he says to Amy to ‘call me, blood,<sup>4</sup> [if you are afraid]’ and also at times as a good husband; as a strong ‘muscle man’, passionate lover, but more often than not also as a bad boy, lad or ‘gunda’ (criminal), being chased more than once by the police.

In the context of their love talk this (traditional) gender positioning is often simultaneously contextualised in a play frame just like much of their affectionate practice overall (see use of baby voice; tickling and teasing, e.g. ‘fat boy’ in Extract 3. Love talk presents an opportunity for couples to play with a range of roles or personas. As Langford (1997: 170) argues ‘a love relationship is partly [...] negotiated through the adoption of alter personalities who play out their interactions within a mutually constructed imagined world’. The examples that Langford provides from Valentine Messages, as well as Osborne’s literary example of Alison and Jimmy’s squirrel and bear play, are based on (fluffy and cute) household pets or cuddly toys. Ray and Amy do not use cuddly pet names for one another, but their switches into stereotypical gender positions in their love talk serve a similar purpose as the (equally gender stereotyped) use of pet names, that is, the playful, creative and safe expression of affection in couples’ relationships.

## 6) Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was, first of all, to revisit couples' talk as an interesting area of research for language and gender studies. Rather than trying to approach my data with an interest in competitive vs. collaborative conversational style, my focus has been on expressions of affection, largely because this is something that stood out from Amy and Ray's self-recorded talk from the start. I was interested to find that this focus on affection is one that is shared by social psychological theory and empirical research on couples talk. However, as my paper has sought to demonstrate, expressions of affection can be very specific to individual couples, which, it seems to me, poses a potential methodological problem for studies which aim to investigate expressions of affection in self-report data and/or interviews based on a-priori lists of behaviours.

The present paper demonstrates that a discourse analytic exploration of spontaneous conversational data has much to offer to our understanding of expressions of affection in intimate couples' interaction. Ray and Amy's affectionate practice is characterised by their playful adoption of different voices and personas, as for example in their ritual insulting sequences, their switches into Sylheti and their positioning in traditional gender discourses. The examples discussed above capture the framing of many of these playful switches as affectionate, most prominently by the use of what Amy describes as their 'baby voice', but also by the affectionate content of what is being said or by non-verbal cues such as kissing. By approaching the data from the perspective of frame analysis, it has been possible to capture how frequently the young speakers switch their voice, and how these voice switches can be contextualised as both affectionate and playful. The playfulness of the love talk does not mean that these expressions of affection are any less sincere, but it does mean an increased sense of ambiguity. In a recent special collection on heteroglossia and humour, Alexandra Jaffe, Michele Koven, Sabina Perrino and Cecile B. Vigoroux (2015: 136) highlight the 'ambiguity of heteroglossic speech, which permits multiple frames and voices to coexist without definite resolution'. Although the contributions to Jaffe et al.'s volume come from frequently ideologically-laden, staged multilingual performances, such as of Canadian-Portuguese amateur comedians on You-tube, the point about the ambiguity of multiple voices, enhanced by their playful framing, remains valid in relation to the affectionate practice of Amy and Ray. Amy and Ray clearly take great delight in exploiting the ambiguity created by the playful polyphony which characterises their intimate talk for the purpose of their affectionate practice. It is precisely because of the ambiguous, creative and idiosyncratic nature of affectionate practice that linguistic discourse analysis of spontaneous interaction has the potential to make significant contributions to the study of affection in intimate relationships.

## 7) Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Transcription is based on the stave system which mirrors a musical score. Both speakers are represented within each stave, and the sequence of speech is represented from left to right (rather than top to bottom). Simultaneous speech is represented by vertically aligned utterances within one stave.

### Transcription Key

<i>{laughter}</i>	non verbal information
<u>xxxxxx</u> <i>{laughing}</i>	paralinguistic information qualifying underlined utterance

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[.....]	beginning/end of simultaneous speech
(xxxxxxx)	inaudible material
(.....)	doubt about accuracy of transcription
CAPITALS	increased volume
%.....%	decreased volume
<b>bold print</b>	speaker emphasis
/	rising intonation
yeah:::::	lengthened sound
=	latching on (no gap between speakers' utterances)
(.)	micropause
(-)	pause shorter than one second
(1); (2)	timed pauses (longer than one second)
.hhh; hhh	in-breath; out-breath

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that there are many other non-verbal ways of displaying affection which an audio-recording will not pick up on, e.g. facial expressions, hugs and alignments of participants towards one another (see Goodwin 2014). However, in the context of the extreme and ever-increasing difficulties that I have experienced in finding young speakers willing to record their personal talk for me in private contexts (see also Piller 2002 having to switch to questionnaires/interviews after not obtaining spontaneous couples' talk the 'Fishman/DeFrancisco way'), I would defend the use of audio-recording to capture couple's spontaneous interaction. The intrusion that couples feel about recording their personal interaction as well as their awareness of being recorded would certainly be heightened by cameras or film crews (see for example Goodwin's 2014 data).

<sup>3</sup> A couple of days before a conference Amy told me that she did not want male audience members to hear what she herself called her 'baby voice'. Both Amy and Ray had of course signed an informed consent form about me being able to play extracts from the talk to academic audiences and she would have allowed me to play the extracts with a distorted voice. Nevertheless I decided to present only a written version of the extracts in my oral presentations of the data as I wanted to be certain that that Amy felt entirely reassured.

<sup>4</sup> Ray frequently uses the slang term 'blood' (original used by one gang member to address another) in addressing Amy.

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